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LITERATURE IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS¹

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The recognition of literature as an elementary-school subject, as a matter that shall be named in the course of study and provided for in the time schedule, is rather recent; and therefore we can hardly wonder that in some schools it has made no headway and that in others the conception of its purpose and scope should be most inadequate. We find every variety of attitude toward literature in the schools, from that of the conservative who regards it as a useless frill, a dangerous indulgence at war with the practical training that should prevail, to that of the sentimental enthusiast who looks upon the study of literature, with its inspiring ideals, as a panacea for all unrighteousness. And we find equally great extremes of policy on the part of our program makers, ranging from the course of study that gives no basis of selection and no word of advice as to the material to be studied, to the detailed program that provides for every month in the year if not for every day in the month. Somewhere between these extremes there must be safe middle ground; and the first step toward gaining a foothold on it lies in the consideration of what our aim should be in the so-called literature work of the elementary schools.

What are we striving to secure? Is it familiarity with a few standard pieces of verse and prose? Is it the ability to quote a goodly number of brief selections from English poetry, popularly known as "gems"? Is it the reproduction, in carefully constructed sentences, of Æsop's fables, the most hard-worked literary production in existence, with the possible exception of *Hiawatha*? Is it a knowledge in detail of the lives of some half-dozen American poets? Or is it the assurance that we are sending our boys and girls on with a liking for good books, the habit of reading them, and the power t

¹Read as portion of the Report of the Committee on Methods before the New England Association of Teachers of English.

find life and inspiration in them? And do we remember that in the grammar school "sending our boys and girls on" means, more often than it does not, sending them on not into the higher schools but out into life, and that in such cases if the taste for good reading has not been formed it is likely never to be formed? Nor can we take refuge behind the work that the public libraries are doing. They are doing magnificent work, but they cannot do it all and they must have the co-operation of the schools.

Those of you who have read a book published within the last year called "The Long Day," the story of a New York working girl as told by herself, have had brought home to you as never before the duty and privilege of the schools in this matter of good reading. The writer says:

I had opportunity for meeting many hundreds of girls and for becoming more or less acquainted with them all. Now, of all these I have not yet discovered one who had not at some time in her earlier childhood or girlhood attended a public school.

And yet in a chapter devoted to an account of the reading of these girls we find that the books they enjoy and discuss are practically all of the yellow-back variety. Not one standard novel, and what is more hopeless, not one simple, wholesome story appears among them all. Let me quote a few paragraphs, indicating their standards:

"What kind of story books do you read, then?" they demanded. To which I replied with the names of a dozen or more of the simple, every-day classics that the school-boy and girl are supposed to have read. They had never heard of *David Copperfield* or of Dickens. Nor had they ever heard of *Gulliver's Travels*, nor of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. They had heard the name of *Robinson Crusoe*, but they did not know it was the name of an entrancing romance. *Little Women*, *John Halifax, Gentleman*, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, *Les Misérables*, were also unknown, unheard-of literary treasures. . . .

I spoke enthusiastically of *Little Women*, telling them how I had read it four times, and that I meant to read it again some day. Their curiosity was aroused over the unheard-of thing of anybody ever wanting to read any book more than once, and they pressed me to reciprocate by repeating the story for them, which I did with great accuracy and with genuine pleasure to myself. . . . When I had finished, Phoebe stopped her cornering and Mrs. Smith looked up from her pasting.

"Why, that's no story at all," the latter declared.

"Why, no," echoed Phoebe; "that's no story—that's just every-day happenings. I don't see what's the use putting things like that in books. I'll bet any money that lady what wrote it knew all them boys and girls."

Certainly, this emphasizes a need in our public-school training that many of us have had occasion to feel keenly more than once; and in talking with elementary teachers I find a ready recognition of this need and a desire to meet it; yet the schools in which effective work is done in this direction are rare compared with those in which geography or arithmetic is well taught. What stands in the way?

In the first place, there is a traditional feeling that reading for pleasure and not for information is an indulgence and therefore not a duty of the school. There is an impression, too, that the homes take care of the general reading; this may once have been true, but it is no longer so in great numbers of families represented in our elementary schools. Again, the press of the so-called practical and disciplinary studies leaves little time for systematic work in literature. But I believe one of the most potent obstacles is the shibboleth of literature *per se*. The very term literature, with all its hallowed associations, has prevented us from doing for the children what they most need. *Little Women* is not literature, perhaps, and the "masterpieces" studied in the grammar school may be; but the habit of reading books like *Little Women* outside of school stands for more in a child's life than the most carefully chosen course of literature in school that has no effect upon the outside reading. If the outside reading remains unmodified, we have failed of our chief purpose. I fear that we teachers are sometimes deceived by the interest that our pupils appear to take in our literature lessons, and by their occasional expressions of appreciation. There is a delusive schoolroom interest that is easily mistaken for something more vital and enduring.

Last year a friend of mine who teaches the entering class in a city high school for girls, and who has the so-called commercial pupils only, asked her girls early in the year to write a paper on their outside reading. Of these ninety or more girls, all fresh from the grammar schools, the majority seemed to be very frank and genuine in their response. Of course one can never be absolutely sure of the trustworthiness of such statements, but the circumstances under which these papers were written and the ring of the papers themselves go far to stamp them as genuine. As samples of genuineness, take these two statements:

I do not like to read anything that contains anything about Botany, as I find it very dry reading indeed.

There is one thing I never do, and that is, read a book twice, except when I forget the story, or when I have absolutely nothing else to read.

Now in these very papers and in others bearing similar marks of genuineness, I find the following significant statements, showing how great a gulf may be fixed between the schoolroom literature and the outside reading even in the case of pupils who profess—and probably do take—enjoyment in the schoolroom procedures.

FIRST PAPER

Poetry I like ever so much, especially *The Lady of the Lake*. . . . There have been three or four books that I have liked so well that I would read them over again. They are Mary J. Holmes's books and their names are *Maggie Miller*, *Beulah*, by Clay, *Tempest and Sunshine*, and *The Browns*. . . . Every night after supper I read the newspaper. I like the funny section and I am always looking over the theatrical section. When there is a fire or murder I like sometimes to read them, but mama doesn't like me to read about the murdered things. I was very interested in the _____ account. (Here the name of a notorious criminal case was given.)

SECOND PAPER

I like good poetry. I very seldom read poetry at home as I never get out the meaning as well as in school, where the teacher explains it. . . . Every night I always read the tenth page of the *Daily Globe*, which contains a continued story, a short story, a "Boy's and Girl's Column," and the "Housekeeper's Column." The "Boy's and Girl's Column" often contains some very good literature.

THIRD PAPER

I like to read conversational poetry such as *Grandmother's Story of Bunker Hill*. I have read the story a great many times and enjoy the story very well. Another story I read was *Poor and Proud*. Another is *Bobby Bright*, both of which are very interesting.

FOURTH PAPER

In regard to poetry, I like some poetry but I never read such a beautiful poem as *Sir Launfal*. . . . I have read a great number of books and have read six or seven over once. Among those I like which I have read twice or three times are: *The Ghost* which is a grandmother's tale; three series of *Cricket*, another romance of a little girl who lived in a beautiful house in a country village; and *Ruby at School*.

A great deal of the grammar-school literature work with which I am acquainted is a study of poetry, and somewhat too largely it is

a study of the American poets only. It is not that this is not in itself good; it is not that the children do not find pleasure and profit in it; but the weakness in the system lies here, that the outside reading is unmodified. Good poetry—in the child's view—is for school with the teacher near by to explain; but out of school, stories are in order. Of course they are; the majority of grown people who read at all read fiction; why should not the children do the same? But because they do, and because the bulk of their reading in later years is to be fiction, the pressing question for us is—what can the school do to secure an interest in good, wholesome stories? It can, if necessary, take a part of the time now assigned to “gems” and “masterpieces” and devote it to this end. Great as the privilege is of opening, to as many as will enter, the door of the higher forms of literature, poetry above all, it is a greater privilege and a more urgent duty to guide the judgment and taste of the great majority in their choice of books for every-day outside reading.

Inasmuch as I am speaking as a member of a committee on methods, it may seem as if I had spent a disproportionate amount of time in sketching the aim of the work in literature, and as if it were high time that the methods were making their appearance. The fact is, it is not until one has a firm grasp of what he means to do, that it is possible to plan how to do it. Purpose *determines* method. Except as it grows out of purpose, method is a mechanical affair at the best. Nothing is more dangerous than that limited view of method which leads a teacher to feel that she has found the one and only way of doing any given thing. When a teacher sees clearly that her teaching of English will fail of its best opportunities unless there is a growing interest in books throughout her class, several things are likely to be true of her method. In the first place, she will arrive at a rational basis of selection and will make herself acquainted with enough good books for children to supply their immediate demands.

A rational basis of selection in planning a literature course for elementary schools is a matter to which much attention has been given in the last fifteen years: advocates of an ethical core, of a race-development core, of a chronological basis, of a strictly American basis, have not been wanting among us. Much thought and considerable experience have led me to believe that although successful

work may be done by following any one of these plans, provided the teacher is larger than the plan, the best features of each may be retained in a course built on the following foundation: (1) The predominate interests of the pupils must be recognized and gratified or our time is wasted, for if the children read at all outside of school, they will find material that will gratify those interests, and it will often be far from desirable in quality. (2) The total moral influence of the books and selections chosen must "make for righteousness." (3) The literary quality must be as good as conditions will allow; it may range all the way from the charm of Hawthorne's *Wonder Book* or of Lamb's *Barbara S.* to the unpretentious but attractive prose of Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did*. (4) The course planned for a year or a series of years must have variety, proportion, scope. No one country, no one period, no one form of literature is enough: the American poet and the English, the ancient myth and the modern fairy-tale, the nature poem and the short story of real life, all have messages for our boys and girls.

And having settled upon a rational basis of selection, and having made herself familiar with material illustrating it, our teacher will find time for several other things; she will find a few moments each day for reading aloud to the class; she will lend the children books to take home and will put the numbers of public-library books on the blackboard; she will discuss with the children the books they are reading, leading them to express themselves freely, often reserving her own opinions, and, again, giving them when they will count. Her method will grow negatively as well as positively; there are certain things that she will not do: she will not call for much formal oral or written reproduction, for she finds that this defeats her main purpose; she will ask for a paraphrase only when that is the shortest and best route to the thorough understanding of the thing read. Above all, she will recognize that in order to understand the life in books, quite as much as to understand the life in the real world, children need guidance. They do not see the significance of things—why should they? It takes a world of common-sense to steer our way here. We must, ourselves, find life in the book; we must discern what, on the whole, it stands for; we must see what there is in the companionship offered in its pages, by which a child may

profit; and then, without being didactic, without labeling the virtues of the people portrayed, we must help children to appreciate them.

This whole line of effort may be greatly re-enforced by lending libraries. In a fifth grade that I visited not long ago, some thirty books from the public library were being used in this way and were in great demand. In another school, such a library, provided by public-spirited friends, is in constant use. In some primary schools, even, this good work is in progress. These books may or may not be literature, in the strictest sense, but certain fundamental things must be true of them all. If a third-grade child travels home with a book of old-fashioned fairy-tales under his arm, he has, so far as the subject-matter goes, a bit of real literature with him; whether the form is literary depends upon the version of the old tales chosen—and why cannot we have the best? A fourth-grade child selects Miss Jewett's *Play Days*; a sixth-grade girl, *Little Women*; an eighth-grade boy, *Treasure Island*; a ninth-grade pupil, *John Halifax* or *Ivanhoe* or *Silas Marner* or *David Copperfield*. A final adjustment of literary values may arrange these books on different levels, but in every instance the more important demands are being met—the books interest the young readers and their total influence is for good.

To dwell for a moment on the need of guidance—I have spent many hours in recent years in discussing books with young people; and I am frequently surprised that they get so little out of them. “But what did you think of the man who visited the children in the den and entered into their play as if he had been one of them?” I asked a young woman who had been reading Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy* for the sake of the study of imaginative childhood that it contains. “I don't remember it,” she replied.

I felt very much as a man who kept a little picture shop in Canterbury seemed to feel when I said, pointing to a photograph of a strikingly beautiful detail, “Is this a part of Canterbury Cathedral?” “Yes mum,” he replied, “didn't you see it?” “No,” I responded apologetically, for I had spent the morning in visiting the cathedral. “Then you have not seen the cathedral, mum,” he said with grave finality.

Too often it seems to me that my young friends have not “seen

the cathedral:" they have not lived in the book, they have not made the experience their own. They have passed a pleasant hour or so, pleasanter than if they had been learning a history lesson or solving examples in arithmetic; but they are not much richer than before. They drift on through a book as some people drift through life, making no close friendships, winding no "tendrils" such as Wordsworth speaks of, "strong as those of flesh and blood" around the books they read. The wise teacher lives in the book with the children. She finds out whom they like and dislike, why they feel as they do, what they would have done under similar circumstances, in this way making the life of the book real and a part of the child's own life.

Of course I have not forgotten the inevitable question, "How shall we make time for all this?" I have been grappling with that question too many years on my own account to forget it. Let me suggest a minimum possible to every teacher who cares enough for the cause to try a few experiments. (1) One good book may be read aloud in the course of a year, or—if we are dealing with little children—a dozen or twenty good short stories may be read or told; and many books may be lent, and a few of those most generally read may be discussed; (2) the teacher may read aloud one good poem every day, a *good* poem, for the greatest poets—unlike the great novelists and essayists—have much to say that children understand and love; it may not be a new poem every day, for some poems will be called for again and again; yet this practice may mean becoming acquainted with fifty new poems in the course of a year; (3) a few poems, eight or ten perhaps, may be studied and learned by heart; this may be done not only that the pupils may have the poems to keep but that they may recognize the difference between the thorough study of literature and a mere passing acquaintance with it; (4) and whenever the reading-lesson is a bit of standard literature—as is often the case in the reading-books now in the field—it may be handled with the insight and appreciation that literature deserves.

Suppose that not only one year but eight years of a child's life held these possibilities, can there be any doubt that his outlook would be larger, his days happier, and his inspiration to worthy living more potent and fruitful?